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From Forced Displacement to Autonomous Life

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Mexmûr (Makhmour) located in the triangle between Mosul, Kerkûk and Hewler in Northern Iraq/South Kurdistan, is a place where over 10.000 Kurds from Southeastern Turkey/North Kurdistan, especially from the Botan Region, found refuge. The people, who fled the war of the Turkish state in the early 90s, stayed in different camps temporarily before reaching Mexmûr Camp 20 years ago, which is supposed to be formally protected by the United Nations and the Iraqi Government. 20 years ago, this place was nothing more than a piece of desert, without trees, plants or access to clean water. Almost everyone at the camp claims that in the beginning, there was nothing but scorpions and snakes in the desert and that many people, among them children, had died from the living conditions. Although the camp is supposed to enjoy protection from national and international institutions, when it comes to the building of the foundations for living, it is the people of Mexmûr themselves whose spirit, confidence and power built all the houses, schools, academies, cooperatives, hospitals and institutions for the people. Many of those, who came here as children back then, are now the workers, mothers, teachers and thinkers holding society

and life together. As a group of activists from Europe, we visited the camp in the summer of 2018.

Rarely one can see a place where the reality of the Kurdish people is reflected as well as in Mexmûr. The camp tells the story of war and resistance in Northern Kurdistan on one side, and the struggles and rebellions of South Kurdistan and West Kurdistan (Rojava) in the past few years on the other side. The people of Mexmûr have seen war and oppression caused by the Turkish state, as well as having been active part of the resistance of the Kurdish people against it in the 90s. While their villages were destroyed by the state, because they refused to collaborate with the state against the guerrillas, the people of Botan led popular people's uprisings (*serhildan*). They have experienced attacks by ISIS/Daesh in 2014 and responded with the legacy of organized physical and mental self-defence of the peoples and the Kurdish freedom movement all over Kurdistan. Now, their social, political and economic structure represents an answer and a solution for the crises caused by colonialism, capitalism, nationalism and patriarchy. As one woman from the women's assembly put it: "*This camp exists because the people here reject the capitalist and nation-state system. This is the reason why we were expelled from our homes. And that's why nobody here decides against our system and decides to leave the camp, because they already have decided against the capitalist system 25 years ago.*"

The systems that oppressed the Kurds in all parts of Kurdistan for many decades amongst other things rely on the idea of dependency of people on a higher instance, a state. The only possible radical response against this is a system which is detached from any state presence or intervention, a system which is for the most part self-governed by the people and where all pillars of life are built up and shaped by society itself. And to fight against a system, which oppresses young people and women in particular, it is also essential that the youth and women fight and take part in the very heart of the resistance. This reality became clear to us as soon as we arrived in the camp.

relationship between oneself and society, which means becoming an active part of the social dynamics, not in order to reach 'the aim', but as a basic, ongoing attitude and resistance against the isolation imposed on us by capitalism. Another woman from Ishtar women's assembly said that all the sexist and capitalist mentalities we carry inside of us must be 'vomited out' in order to make room for something new. Only by filling this new room with an organized struggle, a free life, free communes, a blooming earth and the revolutionary love and arts we wish for will be made possible.

Just some footsteps away from the place we stayed in was the youth center. On our first evening we were invited there to a culture and poetry event organized by the youth of Mexmûr. People at the camp repeatedly emphasized that the youth, especially young women, were incredibly creative, active and talented in the realm of literature, arts, music and other handicrafts, despite having limited opportunities. Every artistic and creative space was filled by the energy and spirit of the youth. We felt this when we visited an art studio, which was full of paintings by the young people of Mexmûr, expressing the reality of war, rebellion, nature and women in Kurdistan. The same energy was felt when young women showed us their handmade scarves and bracelets. When we invited them to come over in the evening, they brought dozens of friends just within a few hours, dancing, playing their instruments and singing songs of resistance with us. When experiencing all of this, the role of the youth and young women as part of a transformative, revolutionary process became so much more evident. At the same time, one also realizes what it means for young people to grow up in the reality of capitalism, which, while pretending to be the center of individual liberty, leaves no space for young people to freely develop to their full potential in an environment based on isolation, damaging dependency, pressure and violence. If anything, the current system does the very opposite, it exploits all kinds of creative energy and action, which could eventually turn into rebellion and could potentially tear down the mask of capitalism. It makes us lose a huge part of our ability to transform ourselves and society, a huge part of our ability to even believe that another life is possible and that we all could be the makers of a revolution.

Another driving force of change is the women's movement. Every woman in the camp is connected to the women's assembly, which is named after the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar and was founded in 2003. From what they told us about the history of the camp, one could see that women have built the base for many of the achievements of Mexmûr over the last 20 years. Besides their expe-

rience in fighting against sexist traditions and false beliefs as well as in resisting the nationalism of the Turkish state, their knowledge and consciousness of their own history is another remarkable part of their resistance. Becoming reconnected with history, especially as women, is one aim of *Jineolojî*, a radical women's science that criticizes positivist and rationalist science and instead creates a science that analyzes the hidden history and reality of women and resisting societies. *Jineolojî*, a combination of the Kurdish term for woman, jin, and the Greek term logos, means 'women's science' and stands at the center of the theoretical and scientific struggle of the Kurdish women's movement, for instance at the Martyr Jiyan women's academy in Mexmûr. '5000 years ago, women became the first colony. Since then, the reality and identity of women have been buried in darkness. What is this darkness? It is different ideologies, like sexism or religious fundamentalism. What we try to do through Jineolojî is to bring women's reality to light again', says one member of the Ishtar women's assembly. Ishtar women's assembly does not only work in the sphere of science and education, but also has autonomous committees for health, economy, media/press, self-defence, culture, society and more. With all committees and their own perspectives as women, they permanently keep up with all women in the camp, the communes, the autonomous young women's assembly and the general people's assembly of Mexmûr. It is a place where people constantly stay connected, not only to solve and discuss current problems and questions of the communes. The assembly should not be understood as a mere formal venue for social and political organization, but as an organic sociality. After all, all of its members are at the same time family, friends, neighbors and comrades.

In its members' own words, the Ishtar women's assembly aims to build an 'ethical-political society' based on the liberation of all genders. Also taking into account the ways in which capitalism has tried to turn people into passive, numb objects, building an ethical-political society implies becoming active, political subjects again,

to be in motion, to embody the flow of change of an uprising society which breaks the chains of a 5000-year-old oppressive system. This reality could be seen in the work and efforts of the youth, in the women's assembly and in all institutions.

The teachers working in the academies and schools make their own schoolbooks and even teach subjects like *Jineolojî*.

The self-governed hospital started as a small tent 20 years ago, and now it provides adequate health care every day for everyone in the camp. In a joint effort, the hospital and the health committees of Mexmûr already started other projects as well, such as a center for autistic children.

The cooperatives, which are at the center of the economic system of the camp, offer their groceries and goods without being orientated on profit, but to cover the needs of the communes only. The economy committee, which states that their aim is to communize the economy, is about to create an economy where nobody is poor or rich, where nobody is exploited and where nature is protected and respected.

The social, educational, political and economic structure in Mexmûr is self-governed by the people. 'The system we have here is one that includes all people so that nobody is left out. Everyone can take part, from an elderly mother to young people to children. Every group in society can participate in these works', explains a woman from the economy committee. Despite all difficulties, for example concerning electricity, water, medical resources and more, life in Mexmûr keeps flourishing. It roots in the lands where goddesses like Ishtar were once worshipped, and now it keeps growing with the experiences of people who have witnessed the uprising in Kurdistan in the 90s and the historical resistance – especially of women – against fascism, nationalism and patriarchy in the last decades.

If there is one thing that revolutionary socialist, feminist or anarchist movements could learn from Mexmûr, I believe it is the idea that one cannot change the world without revolutionizing the